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Making History: LU's Jonathon Roberts Vies for National ACTF Sound Design Title

Posted on: April 5th, 2004 by Rick Peterson

It wasn't a case of stage fright that Jonathon Roberts overcame to earn himself a place in the Lawrence University theatre department's history book.

Roberts turned a little self-doubt and a bout of procrastination into an award-winning sound design that has him in the running for a trip to the national finals of the American College Theatre Festival April 12-18 at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., where his work would be showcased with the best of the best in U.S. college theatre in a variety of design and acting categories.

Roberts became a footnote in Lawrence history — with the possibility of becoming a much more prominent note — by winning the ACTF's sound design category at the five-state Region III competition earlier this year at Illinois State University in Normal, Ill. He is the first Lawrence student in any category to win at the ACTF regional level and advance to the national competition.

Cited for his work on Lawrence's fall 2003 production of Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale," Roberts' design is one of eight regional winners that will be selected as the ACTF's national winner. In addition to an invitation to appear at the Kennedy Center, the winner receives a month-long summer fellowship with the sound director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn.

Roberts was responsible for all sound aspects of the production, which included composing nearly 25 minutes of original music for scene changes and underscoring and writing the music for four songs that were performed in the play. His design incorporated an

eclectic mix of conventional and exotic instruments — marimba, Indian Noah bells, a “singing bowl,” wood and metal wind chimes — along with the distinctively non-conventional musical sounds of different types of gravel being poured, dropped and rubbed.

Timothy Troy, associate professor of theatre arts, who directed “The Winter’s Tale,” describes Roberts as “really quite brilliant.”

“Getting to the ACTF nationals is confirmation from the outside that he’s good,” said Troy, who competed in the ACTF himself as a graduate student in 1987. “But I can tell you, he’s really good. Jonathon is as talented a sound designer as anyone I’ve ever worked with in my 15-year professional career. He has an uncanny ability to find a sonic metaphor for the action on stage that perfectly reflects the deepest meanings of the play. That is a rare and highly valued talent.”

Being selected a national sound design finalist is all the more surprising for Roberts considering he barely made it to the regional competition.

“It was right down to the wire to get my materials together and get them submitted for the regional and I was telling myself, ‘I don’t even think I should be doing this,’” said Roberts, a senior double degree candidate majoring in music composition and theatre and drama from Sturgeon Bay. “I wound up turning in an all-nighter to get everything put together.”

The effort proved to be well worth it when, after intense questioning and review by a jury of professionals, Roberts’ design was selected from among 15 regional finalists.

The regional competition involves much more than merely submitting a tape or CD of the productions sounds. Roberts had to assemble a large display that explained how his sounds were

created and more importantly, why they were created. The designer's presentation to the judges plays a role in the process as well.

"I was really nervous," recalled Roberts, who has served as sound designer for five productions at Lawrence. "The judges were pretty intimidating. They really know their stuff. You have to thoroughly explain exactly why you did everything in your design. I was so impressed with their comprehensive knowledge. I learned a tremendous amount about sound and theatre design in a very short time."

Roberts had to leave the regional competition before it was concluded, not knowing his status. He wound up learning the good news several days after he returned to Lawrence.

"I found out from a friend at UW-Green Bay who also was there that my design was the one selected as the winner," said Roberts. "I was really blown away with what I saw at the regional competition, so it was quite thrilling to learn the judges picked mine. I expect to see some truly amazing designs at the national competition."

Thanks to support from the ACTF regional, Roberts will travel to the Kennedy Center to attend masterclasses and design workshops whether he's selected the national winner or not.

Unlike NCAA athletics, the ACTF doesn't designate divisions based on institutional size or curriculum, which means Roberts is competing against sound designers from more than just peer institutions, including those with graduate programs in theatre.

"Regardless of what happens from here, just getting to the national finals is a win," said Troy.

Roberts' design work has drawn the attention of several prestigious programs. If the national title and the O'Neill Theater Center fellowship eludes him, he is hoping to land an internship this summer with either the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre or the Pacific Conservatory of Performing Arts in Santa Maria, Calif.